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# *Our Town*, the MacDowell Colony, and the Art of Civic Mediation

Kathryn S. Roberts\*

In 2011, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the major federal funding body for culture in the US, launched a new set of “creative placemaking” grants. These grants support public–private partnerships for organizations that promise to use art to strengthen “the social, physical, and economic characters of their neighborhoods, towns, cities, and regions.” The program, which gave \$6.575 million to 51 communities in 34 states, is called “Our Town,” after Thornton Wilder’s 1938 play (“NEA Chairman”). This choice by cultural administrators signals something about the play that scholars have yet to reckon with. Eighty years after its Broadway opening, *Our Town* regularly pops up in the cultural sphere when cultural actors seek to align their work with community service.

*Our Town* has long been a staple of community and high school theater. There are practical reasons for this. The first stage direction reads “*No curtain. No scenery*” (Wilder 149). Cash-strapped schools or local theaters don’t need expensive costumes or sets to stage the play, only a couple of folding chairs. The Stage Manager character, Wilder’s theatrical innovation, tells the audience what’s happening and how to feel about it, relieving some of the pressure from the proless actors.<sup>1</sup> The universal subjects of the play—daily life, growing up, marriage, death—invite identification and sentiment. And using nonprofessional actors helps companies support their claims that the arts are by the people, for the people.

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Although set in the fictional New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners at the turn of the twentieth century, *Our Town* is nothing if not flexible. A recent production in Miami featured characters speaking in English, Spanish, and Creole; another by Deaf West Theater in Pasadena integrates Wilder's script with American Sign Language. A 2002 documentary—*OT: Our Town*, directed by Scott Hamilton Kennedy—tells the story of teachers who stage *Our Town* in Compton, a predominantly black and Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles.

*Our Town*'s flexibility makes it an effective vehicle for incorporating local needs into art. In the wake of the May 2017 terrorist attack at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, the Royal Exchange Theatre (RET) perhaps unexpectedly staged *Our Town* as an act of civic pride and healing. The suicide bombing, perpetrated by a 22-year old British Sunni Muslim man of Libyan descent, killed 22 people and injured 119. It also resulted in a surge in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the Manchester area. As a response, the RET cast Youssef Kerkour, a British-Moroccan actor who lives in New York, as the Stage Manager. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Kerkour commented on the importance of his highly visible role: "In the context of what's just happened, I'm overjoyed to say, 'Yes, I'm a Muslim. Come watch the play. Hear my American accent. Look at my beard. We have more in common than we have differences'" (qtd. in Trueman). St. Ann's Square, where the theater sits, became a makeshift memorial for the bombings. Artistic Director Sarah Frankcom recalled that *Our Town* captured the feeling in the city at the time: "We suddenly all went, 'Oh, that's why we have town squares, isn't it?' It wasn't about looking at flowers, but about needing to be together" (qtd. in Trueman). *Our Town* represented both an occasion for public mourning and a show of inclusion. It also allowed the company to assimilate local nonprofessional actors seamlessly into a production—a vital factor when government arts funding is tied to community engagement.

*Our Town* facilitates the relationship between arts organizations and communities in at least four ways. On a basic level, it gives towns and cities a script for representing themselves in terms that are legible across space, time, and human difference. Even as it locates community in a knowable world of face-to-face relationships and civic institutions, it furnishes a structure for recognition among communities of different scales. As the Manchester performance demonstrates, *Our Town* also helps communities manage—aesthetically, perhaps politically—social differences perceived as threatening. Finally, through the Stage Manager, the play figures the artist as a community servant who has the unique power to articulate

the lives of ordinary people and transfigure the everyday into an object of wonder.

*Our Town*'s continued popularity is about more than its appeal to audiences; rather, it is connected to what the play does for arts organizations. The play is what I am calling a *civic mediator*: a performance that installs art at the center of community life and community at the center of art. Its efficacy is both ideological and practical in that it helps arts organizations court audiences and funders. Sometimes art really does make things happen. In this case, the content of the art, both text and performance, matters.

This essay thus makes a case for the importance of the particular work of art in discussions of art's social role, specifically in scholarship on cultural institutions. To be sure, some literature is more interesting in the aggregate. Recent scholarship has shown us how whole genres flower out of literary patronage: creative writing programs spawned "high cultural pluralism" and "technomodernism"; political prerogatives crowned literary minimalists with grant funding.<sup>2</sup> These studies underline the sometimes-embarrassing efficacy of cultural organizations that set out to support the arts and end up shaping them. But some stories break free of their sociocultural conditions of production to become actors in their own right. Homer's *Odyssey* comes to mind: a complicated man transformed into a model for all of Western culture. Hamlet's indecision figures modern self-consciousness. Horatio Alger teaches Americans that pluck and luck can conquer poverty. *Our Town* is another such story—one whose protagonist is a town rather than an individual.

*Our Town* does something for the communities that stage it. In the most extreme cases, it can render otherness familiar and, therefore, mournable. To recognize the play's capacity to transform perceptions of a specific community while simultaneously underlining the sponsoring cultural organization's role in performing that alchemy is to treat *Our Town* as an *actor* in the sense meant by Bruno Latour and Antoine Hennion. Hennion is a sociologist of music who worked for more than two decades alongside Latour at the Center for Social Innovation at l'Ecole des Mines de Paris. In addition to the more familiar term *actor*, Hennion uses *mediation* to capture how works of art "overflow"; that is, they do more than transmit the intentions of the people who engage with them. An artwork or piece of music

does something other than what the humans gathered around it would like it to do, something other than what they have programmed. This is why they listen to it; it is not their double, nor the mirror of their vanity. 'Made' the way it is, it has its own

capacity to act. It forges identities and sensibilities; it does not obey them. (Hennion 294)

Treating artworks as social actors rather than social symptoms or, perhaps, tools of social control, cuts against two powerful traditions of cultural sociology and criticism. Dwight Macdonald, influenced by Frankfurt School critiques of the culture industry, saw *Our Town*'s combination of folksy idiom and formal sophistication as the industrial product of a debased society, one that had killed off the kinds of community that nurture authentic art. For him, art and democracy were in direct conflict: "The great cultures of the past have all been elite affairs, centering in small upper-class communities which had certain standards in common and which both encouraged creativity by (informed) enthusiasm and disciplined it by (informed) criticism" (53). Writing as a sociologist rather than a critic, Pierre Bourdieu nonetheless focuses on how the making and consumption of art reflects habits of mind and body (*habitus*) that are determined by one's class position.<sup>3</sup> In *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (1965), Bourdieu describes how art forms like photography appeal to middle-class audiences because they are accessible to amateurs and retain their association with mass commercial production, even if these arts have gained their place in elite cultural institutions like museums (5–6).

I grant that *Our Town* is a middlebrow text insofar as it appeals to audiences by combining the sophistication of modernist staging techniques with commercially accessible themes. Yet, I argue, perhaps the most significant "middleness" of *Our Town* is not its function as a signifier of class, but rather its capacity to mediate civic life: to serve as a go-between among arts institutions, audiences, and funders. This capacity is bound up with the play's composition history. Although Grover's Corners is a fictional place, it is based on the New Hampshire town where Wilder composed much of the play, Peterborough. In 1907, the soon-to-be-widowed wife of a famous composer decided to turn her farm there into a retreat for artists in all disciplines. Today, the MacDowell Colony hosts hundreds of artists and writers each year, most for month-long residencies of uninterrupted work. Indeed, winning a fellowship there (or at another, similarly prestigious residency) is often a milestone in the career of a young writer; for some, residency is an annual ritual. Thornton Wilder spent his first month at the MacDowell Colony in 1924 and returned more than ten times during his career. But the entanglement of *Our Town* and the MacDowell Colony is more than a story of institutional support. It is a gathering of social and aesthetic threads that unsettles our ideas about the relationship between life and art.

[T]he most significant "middleness" of *Our Town* is not its function as a signifier of class, but rather its capacity to mediate civic life: to serve as a go-between among arts institutions, audiences, and funders.

From its earliest days, the Colony's existence depended on the good will of the local community and the wallets of a national network of amateur art enthusiasts. Unlike Yaddo or Bread Loaf, MacDowell became a model for the art of civic mediation—the delicate practice of installing so-called culture in the hearts and city centers of the middle-class public. It did so by portraying art as a form of community service, and this strategy shaped Wilder's creative practice. *Our Town* echoes, in its form and content, the 1910 Peterborough Pageant, a collaboration between colony founder Marian MacDowell, the local community, and Harvard drama professor George Pierce Baker. And yet, no biographer or literary scholar has claimed direct influence. Though Wilder never commented on the pageant, at least in the letters I have seen, he would have been familiar with it. The Colony revived the pageant in 1919 without Baker's help. Moreover, the event was an integral part of the Colony's founding lore, a favorite topic of Marian MacDowell's at her weekly Sunday teas. Interested as he was in theatrical innovation, Wilder would have surely been told about the pageant (even if he hadn't asked).<sup>4</sup> Wilder's letters are quick to credit the MacDowell Colony with making his writing possible and showing him how to be an artist. But aesthetic debts seem to be more difficult for writers to acknowledge than economic and social ones. The irony here is in some sense an artifact of the Colony's own dogma. Though MacDowell offered a model for how art could serve the community, it never challenged the powerful post-Romantic ideology of the artist as inspired genius, creating *sui generis* works.

The vast majority of writers' colonies are, paradoxically, anti-communitarian communities. They work because they provide an effective way of negotiating the art-community tension. They are both a solution to the loneliness of writers in a dispersed, democratic nation—or at least they were once conceived to be—and a way of managing the literary scene in a city like New York, a city that draws in literary aspirants and installs them in unzoned lofts, only to fight one another for air and attention. This partially explains colonies' appeal to writers. On their face, these institutions seem to do little to negotiate the relationship between art and a wider public. For local residents, art colonies were a curiosity, a nuisance, or—at best—a source of rents and retail. The MacDowell Colony was an exception, and its uniquely civic-minded art patronage had reverberations far beyond the New Hampshire woods. Though perhaps best suited to the pressures of democracy and capitalism, civic mediation is a flexible mode that—as I hope to show—affords translation across media and borders.

## 1. The Incorporation of American Art

The history of the MacDowell Colony, and of institutions like it, illuminates the unsettled position of both art and community in the US. Art seems a luxurious afterthought in the context of settler colonialism, slavery, and rapid industrialization, and community can be a barrier to profit. Independence, hard work, property: those, we know, are the mythical ingredients of a capitalist American Dream, and they make sense in a country founded on Enlightenment ideals and economic self-interest. These sorts of assertions about national character have, over time, gained a certain explanatory power, even as they may obscure the diversity of lived conditions.

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville described the young nation as a dispersed aggregate of overlapping voluntary associations among citizens. To Tocqueville, this associationalism was a positive development, with the potential to curb the forces of “individualism” and the “tyranny of the majority” (both his coinages) that were endemic to democracy. Yet voluntary associations, like democracies, are fragile beings, dependent in some fundamental way on continued participation and human will. In *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992), Joan Shelley Rubin shows us a middle-class literature that is self-consciously institutional—perennially concerned with maintaining and extending these associations. Perhaps this has something to do with the fragility of democratic collectives, founded on human action rather than blood, soil, or divine right.

The hospitality of American art toward institutions may also have to do with the weakness of art patronage in the US. The world’s oldest modern democracy lacked the illustrious traditions of church, court, and state patronage that shaped the arts in Europe. Until well into the twentieth century, artistic and literary culture in the US faced east. Painters trained in Paris; writers moved there; the City of Lights later became the site from which modernists harangued their philistine homeland. It wasn’t until the Gilded Age that the American superrich—Carnegies, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Morgans, Stanfords—poured money into art and culture, partly as a way of installing themselves in the pantheon of civilization’s noble patrons. They founded universities, libraries, museums, all institutions that enshrined the arts, injecting them into the life of a commercial nation while protecting them from its crass tastes.<sup>5</sup>

The very end of this period saw the rise of writers’ colonies: scenic retreats for mostly white writers to work and hobnob in the summer, away from the sweltering flats of Manhattan. Some of these colonies, like Yaddo, were founded by idealistic robber barons to foster civilized, almost courtly relations among the nation’s “creative workers” (qtd. in Alexander 107).<sup>6</sup> Others, like

Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod, were informal watering holes of the Greenwich Village art scene, where married writers bought cheap houses and acted as patrons to their younger or more impecunious fellows. Before the Provincetown Players made Eugene O'Neill famous, they kept him fed; writing to an old flame, he assured her that the town was really a collection of "households with females presiding," where she—or at least her parents—could be assured of a proper chaperone (73).

Creativity is a social process that requires a hospitable environment, yet the tension between creativity and organization is a perennial theme. Malcolm Cowley, literary editor of the *New Republic* and longtime member of Yaddo's admissions committee, described the paradox of organizing creativity in a 1931 letter to Yaddo's executive director. Quoting from his own manuscript (which would later become the Lost Generation chronicle *Exile's Return* [1934]), he wrote:

"American writers are, by reaction, ferocious individualists. They fear collective action of any sort: it reminds them of the Y.M.C.A., the Elks, the Shriners, the Rotarians; they will neither lead nor follow, and 'the only club I belong to,' they often say, 'is the ancient society of Non-Joiners' . . . They are bent on preserving the anarchy of their individual lives," etc., etc. It's all true, and it reminded me of the astounding success you have had in imposing order on these essential anarchists. . . . (qtd. in Alexander 125–26)

A working community of creative people did not look like a trade union or a countercultural commune, or even Brook Farm. Writers' colonies respected the eccentricities of ferocious individualists, cultivated the diversity that generated new ideas, and encouraged mutual respect and basic cohesion through a meritocratic admissions policy—or at least at the discretion of cultural statesmen such as composer Aaron Copland, *New Masses* editor Granville Hicks, and critic and urban theorist Lewis Mumford.

The colony model was compelling to writers not only because it respected the values of the art world, but also because it solved the problem of intellectual loneliness. In a later essay, Cowley claimed that "many European visitors, among them Stephen Spender and Simone de Beauvoir, have been impressed or saddened by the loneliness of American writers, as contrasted with the busy literary life of Paris and London" (200). The point was not that writers were isolated from other people. Wallace Stevens was an executive at the Hartford Insurance Company, and William Carlos Williams was a pediatrician in Rutherford, New Jersey. The point was that they



were isolated from each other, and Cowley used this fact to explain the eccentricity and provincialism of American letters, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to William Faulkner. Novelists, he observed, often chose “exceptional characters who, like themselves, were outside the current of American society” (227). Rather than ameliorating this tendency, artist colonies enhanced it, furnishing a community of fellow eccentrics, an escape into solidarity with other creative people on the economic, familial, and geographical margins.

US writers’ colonies boast a strange combination of archaism and futurism. They can even elicit comparisons to monasteries; many present themselves as the New World version of Old World country houses; and their rhetoric—the term *creative workers* is ubiquitous in the writings of colony founders—conjures the image of dedicated craftsmen working in harmony. Writers’ colonies were a relatively marginal phenomenon in the US until the 1970s, when residencies structured along the lines of MacDowell and Yaddo began sprouting up in virtually every state. In his 2004 history and theory of the “Creative Economy,” Richard Florida declares that “creative class” values include individuality, diversity, and meritocracy (77–80). Writers’ colonies—innovation incubators *avant la lettre*—anticipated this taxonomy. (Perhaps that is because it is a typically American, Protestant, liberal taxonomy.) Today, such residencies are global and ubiquitous. The US-based Alliance of Artists Communities (a group seeded by a 1990 MacArthur Foundation grant) lists more than 500 domestic residencies and over 1,500 abroad (“Residencies”). Given the scale of the writers’ colony phenomenon today and its potential power to shape the literary field, perhaps it is enough merely to point to its origins here and indicate some of its stranger effects on cultural discourse.

One way to interpret the explosion of artist residencies abroad is to see it as part of a broader Americanization of the global cultural field. When the RET staged *Our Town* in Manchester, they courted the funding of local and central governments, funding that has diminished under conditions of post–Great Recession austerity. Arts Council England (ACE) and regional agencies have witnessed steady cuts to spending, thus encouraging British arts organizations to look to US funding schemes as a model. According to available data, the NEA spent \$0.44 per citizen in 2003, compared to \$22.99 spent by ACE for the same year (Canada Council for the Arts 4).<sup>7</sup> A 2013 editorial in the *Guardian* bewailed recent cuts to public funding as the Americanization of British arts: “ministers claim that philanthropy is the answer, but it never was. In the US, relying on donors deadens the arts, filling their boards with the conservative-minded, failing to stimulate experiment and imagination—as only

independent funding can” (Toynbee). The irony here cuts in at least two ways. Civic mediation, for the MacDowell Colony, was a strategy to attract democratic patronage in a nation without federal arts funding, without having to beg from billionaires and corporations. Manchester used an American play to resist the “Americanization” of the art world.

## 2. Civic Theatre

The MacDowell Colony was part of the emerging cultural establishment in the US at the turn of the twentieth century. Edward MacDowell, after whom the colony is named, was the first US composer to earn a significant international reputation. He served on the boards of the newly established American Academy in Rome as well as the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, where he also founded the music department at Columbia University. He married a protégée, a woman from a genteel Connecticut family. In 1896, Marian MacDowell’s money bought and renovated an 80-acre farm on the outskirts of Peterborough, New Hampshire.<sup>8</sup>

As with any human collective, a founding mythology is as important to the MacDowell Colony’s persistence as bricks, mortar, and money. The MacDowell myth is a log cabin. In a talk she gave at the colony, Marian MacDowell recalled how sensitive Edward had his muses chased off by the noise of her housework (MacDowell). One day, she surprised him with a studio: a simple log cabin she had built for him in the woods. Edward worked diligently and uninterrupted there, and Marian brought his lunch in a basket, quietly leaving it on the porch. This ritual of conspicuous respect for creative process continues at the Colony today, an ethos and practice that Yaddo adopted, too.

Edward MacDowell’s log cabin was a retreat from the institutional as well as the domestic. He resigned from Columbia in 1904 in protest against the lack of funding for fine arts departments. In 1905, he suffered a nervous collapse, and the New York papers blamed the university, portraying the popular composer and teacher as a martyr: “E.A. MacDowell a Wreck—His Days of Work Over—Columbia Trouble and Overwork Blamed for Composer’s Illness” (qtd. in Rausch 58). Donations poured in from across the country to support MacDowell through what everyone assumed would be a long illness. Within three years, he was dead at the age of 48. (Symptoms and the death certificate suggest that it was tertiary syphilis, not his workload at Columbia, that killed MacDowell, but that is *not* part of colony mythology.<sup>9</sup>)

When his wife founded her colony, she did so without the industry-fueled endowment that made an institution like Yaddo independent. The colony was intended as a memorial tribute to Edward, and Mrs. MacDowell raised most of the money herself. Taking advantage of the national network of MacDowell Clubs—local collectives of music enthusiasts, mostly women—she gave recitals of her husband’s music, explained “The Colony Idea,” and asked for donations. From 1908 until the 1940s, Marian MacDowell was a one-woman listener-supported enterprise.

The recitals sustained the colony. But the start-up money for this “impecunious experiment” (her words) came from a more concentrated fundraising scheme (qtd. in Falconer-Salkeld 5). In early 1910, MacDowell approached Baker about the idea of producing a pageant based on Peterborough’s history. She suggested he use the local choir that had also been established in her husband’s memory, and perhaps use some of MacDowell’s music. Baker was a pioneer of creative writing instruction in universities—later, O’Neill and Thomas Wolfe would take his “English 47” workshop.<sup>10</sup> He embraced the pageant scheme as an opportunity to test out some of his ideas about “Civic Theatre,” drafting two former English 47 students to orchestrate the MacDowell pieces and write lyrics, and recruiting nearly 200 Peterborough residents to take part. Baker later wrote that some of his actors “came for an afternoon rehearsal, drove home four miles, milked [their cows] and returned for an evening rehearsal” (qtd. in Rausch 70). The pageant performances drew as many as 1,500 people per day, not only from New Hampshire and Boston, but also from across the country and as far as Europe.

The Peterborough Pageant was an early example of the vogue for historical pageants in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Pageant enthusiasts included theater and music professionals like Baker, as well as settlement-house workers, civic leaders, labor organizers, suffrage activists, education reformers, and even advocates for city playgrounds. These community leaders saw pageants as experiments in local participatory democracy, with communities forming committees and making decisions collectively to produce a large-scale performance. Assimilation was an explicit part of pageant culture: to school the new urban, immigrant masses in the ways of US (read: ruling class) social practice. As Naima Prevots writes in *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art and Democracy* (1990), “immigrants would absorb language and history while also learning democratic principles of cooperation and self-governance” (3).

Like other pageants of the era, Peterborough’s was episodic and historical. The pageant program describes the scenes, which include “an Indian wedding,” the harsh conditions of Northern Ireland

before emigration, the hardships of settlement (with another wedding), the burial of a Native American chieftain (in which “the Indians foresee the passing of their race”), mustering troops for the Revolution, the rise of the local weaving industry, troops returning from the Civil War, and “the coming of new races to Peterborough” (Edward MacDowell Association). The content, including the “vanishing Indian” trope, is conventional for the time. Pageant leaders considered the process of putting together the performance to be as important as the finished product, and their idealism extended in limited ways to matters of social conflict. For example, the organizers of a 1914 pageant in St. Louis believed the cultural mobilization of different groups in the city could break down racial prejudice, based on the idea that “if people play together, they will work together” (Prevots 14). But their focus on harmonizing white immigrants was often coupled with an unwillingness to represent or include African Americans or Indigenous people.

Despite the conventionality of the scenes, Baker declared Peterborough to be “something new in the history of pageantry” for the way it broke with realistic representation. He went on to explain, “the spirit of MacDowell dominated the work. Poetic, dreamy, suggestive, it forbade pure realism in most of the pageant; suggestion, as in the music, must replace that” (Baker 256). In contrast to elaborately staged city pageants, the Peterborough Pageant had no scenery. The setting was an outdoor amphitheater on Colony grounds—really more of a clearing, with wooden benches fronting a backdrop of tall pine trees, and Mount Monadnock looming in the distance. The opening invocation was set to a MacDowell composition entitled “From a Log Cabin.” An actress representing the muse of history called forth the other muses and figures representing the composer’s dreams. All this allegory was summoned to make clear the pageant’s central conceit. The scenes that followed, an aestheticized journey through time and space, were the imaginative work of the composer. As I will argue in the next section, Wilder’s Stage Manager is a self-consciously humbler version of the pageant’s presiding genius: the composer dreaming lyrical local history from a log cabin. In other words, the pageant articulated the paradigm of the artist—and by extension, the colony—as a civic actor.

The Pageant became an effective fundraiser for Marian MacDowell, but Baker saw that it could be a model for future dramatic work. He wrote extensively and lectured across New England about his vision of a “Civic Theatre.” He claimed in a 1910 article for *New Boston* that pageants could serve as a venue for both civic and artistic education, stimulating “local pride . . . strengthening community spirit, and developing the artistic instincts of a community” (261). In this particular case, “Peterborough provided

an admirable chance to test [his] theories,” demonstrating that “pageantry need not be confined to great centers, need not necessitate vast expense, but is perfectly possible for small communities” (259). With its minimal staging and volunteer spirit, the pageant suggested that other towns, given the will and enthusiasm, might stage a similar event.

### 3. A Portable Pageant

Thornton Wilder was a promiscuous borrower.<sup>11</sup> In his essay “Mass-Cult and Mid-Cult,” Macdonald derided Wilder’s famous play for cannibalizing everything from Dante and James Joyce to ancient Chinese and Brechtian staging techniques. For Macdonald, *Our Town* was the apotheosis of the middlebrow: critically acclaimed, popular with audiences, presented with seriousness and just enough difficulty to make people think they were in the presence of art. Macdonald’s description of the play rings true, but the term *middlebrow* reduces *Our Town* to a chip in the game of status signaling and fails to account for the range of economic drivers and emotional attachments entangled with the play’s composition. In *Our Town*, Wilder transformed into a simple play a set of ideas and techniques he learned from the MacDowell Colony, an organization that survived by communicating and rendering significant to a larger public the life of a small, isolated community with a seemingly narrow focus. The MacDowell Colony shaped the form and the ethos of *Our Town*, and the play in turn provided a vehicle to help any community become a self-sustaining cultural enterprise.

Wilder worked on the play at the Colony in June 1937, but he conceived of it earlier, on his many walks through the mountains during previous summer residencies. In a preface to *Our Town*, he records that “it sprang from a deep admiration for those little white towns in the hills” (659). The main action takes place between 1899 and 1913, roughly around the time the MacDowell Colony was founded; an early manuscript has act 1 set, coincidentally, in 1907, the year the Colony opened (Thornton Wilder Papers box 78). Like the Peterborough Pageant, Wilder’s play gestures to local history—from Indigenous peoples to the Civil War dead—in the graveyard scene of act 3. But most strikingly, *Our Town*, like the Peterborough Pageant, is obsessed with the framing vision of the artist, which facilitates the leap from particular instance to panoramic view.

The action of the play follows the Gibbs and Webb families through daily life (act 1), love and marriage (act 2), and death (act 3). It is the Stage Manager, however, who keeps the play from dissolving into a litany of trivial particulars through his contextualizing

or distancing gestures. We learn the town's latitude and longitude, its demographic composition, and its long geologic history: a professor reports that the rock formations beneath the town are "two hundred, three hundred million years old," while the Stage Manager summarizes a marriage as "fifty thousand meals" shared between a white-haired couple (Wilder 159, 182). Like the composer in the log cabin, the Stage Manager is imaginatively omniscient and omnipotent, moving audience and characters freely in time, foretelling death and even defeating it, when he lets Emily Gibbs, née Webb, return to life for a single day. The focus of *Our Town* is indeed the creative power of the artist to present living scenes to tell a story, not merely a nostalgic view of a small town. The play echoes the Peterborough Pageant not only in its content (the tour of the town) and framing device (Stage Manager replacing the composer), but also in its minimalist staging. Macdonald sniped that *Our Town* "is practically actor-proof, which is why it is so often given by local dramatic societies" (41). The snark here actually captures one of the play's most important features, for the ease of production and thematic broadness of Wilder's play afford seemingly endless translation, allowing communities to stage their town while staging *Our Town*.

Even as the play functions as a civic mediator, it is also a play *about* civic mediation, and the emotional ending underlines the role of "poets" in facilitating community feeling. In act 3, Emily Gibbs has died and joins the other local dead, who sit composedly in rows of chairs representing the town graveyard. The Stage Manager grants her final wish to return to life for a single day, but the experience is harrowing: she watches helplessly as her family repeats the daily round of trivial tasks, unable to make them see the wonder and sadness of every moment. The play's climax is Emily's farewell:

Good-by, Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. (*She looks toward the stage manager and asks abruptly, through her tears:*) Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?

STAGE MANAGER: No. (*Pause.*) The saints and poets, maybe—they do some. (Wilder 208)

The end of the play is both a meditation on death and a lesson for the living. The characters in the "graveyard" gaze up at the stars in wonder, awed by the "millions of years" it takes for their light to reach the earth (208). The Stage Manager turns to the audience to ask a pointed rhetorical question: "what's left when memory's gone,

and your identity, Mrs. Smith?” (197). With its singing choir and colloquially sermonizing Stage Manager, *Our Town* is a participatory pageant of collective presence that can be performed anywhere in the world.

*Our Town* insists that the artist’s office is spiritual and civic. This is a distinctly institutional way of thinking about art, out of step with the modernist celebration of art’s autonomy and the avant-gardist’s oppositional politics. It is also a self-interested message, insofar as it resonates with and enhances the promotional campaigns of the MacDowell Colony and other mainstream cultural institutions. By simplifying and abstracting, Wilder’s version of the 1910 Peterborough Pageant enabled endlessly repeated performances, in 1938 and beyond.

#### 4. Community Man

Wilder fashioned a template for the art of civic mediation out of his experiences at the MacDowell Colony. That template also suggested for him a model of what it meant to be an artist. For Wilder himself did not conform to the conventions of middle-class, small-town life. He wrote to his sister in 1927, “I don’t marry. In fact all I’m supposed to do is to make books as a cow gives milk and to live as little as a person as possible” (Thornton Wilder Papers box 1). His letters mention no sustained romantic attachments, and the only references to his sexual life come from the letters and memoirs of friends. (After Wilder’s death, Samuel Steward—a professor, poet, novelist, and tattoo artist based in Chicago—claimed to have had repeated sexual encounters with Wilder, beginning in Zurich in 1937, when Wilder was working on *Our Town*.)<sup>12</sup> Plus, Wilder, as a well-connected cosmopolitan, lived far from the Grover’s Corners of this world. After his father was appointed to a consulship, Wilder was dragged to China, where he attended the same mission school as future media mogul Henry Luce. As an adult, he cultivated transatlantic friendships with Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway and, for six years, taught a world literature course at the University of Chicago, where Robert Hutchins, a close college friend, was president.

Stein’s famous Paris salon was a celebrated model of creative community during this era: fiercely, queerly domestic, and populated by an urbane avant-garde.<sup>13</sup> The MacDowell Colony presented a very different example: monastic, institutional, and conspicuously New England in character. According to his friend and biographer Hermann Hagedorn, the “presiding genius” and “only permanent resident” of the MacDowell Colony was taciturn Edwin Arlington

Robinson, remembered today for poems about cranky monomaniacs like “Richard Cory” and “Miniver Cheevy” (350). Robinson spent his first residency at the MacDowell Colony in 1911. If he had been initially skeptical of the idea of a “colony of artists” (conjuring insects and fungus), he was charmed by the peaceful environment and hours of uninterrupted work, and returned to Peterborough for four months each summer until his death in 1935. In partial gratitude for Marian MacDowell’s support, Robinson even quit drinking and began writing like a machine: in the 1920s, he published a book of poetry per year, winning three Pulitzer Prizes. Not quite the tone of 27 Rue de Fleurus.

The young Wilder found Robinson’s monkish commitment to poetry—what Robinson called “[his] Trappist attitude”—to be a compelling model (Hagedorn 275). Writing home to his mother during his first residency, Wilder said his favorite “Colonist” was indeed Robinson, whom he described as a man of “few graces,” “difficult, austere, an infinitely conscientious workman” (qtd. in Niven 237). After Robinson’s death, Wilder wrote to Marian MacDowell with earnest devotion: “May his single-minded dedication enter my very bones as it has long since influenced my poor willful mind” (Marian MacDowell Papers box 4).

Like Robinson, Wilder was also attracted by the MacDowell Colony’s practical benefits. He recognized in its daily rhythm the “ideal conditions for creative work”: rural isolation, companionship of fellow artists, regular meals, and, most importantly, the guarantee of uninterrupted studio time from nine to five. But the Colony also helped reconcile conflicting facets of Wilder’s personality: an individualistic devotion to his art, a strong sense of civic duty, and a wandering, gregarious streak. Today, we might say he liked to network. In 1937, Wilder recalled in another family letter his friend Stein’s frustrated assessment: “[She said] what puzzles me about you,—is *why*, oh *why*, are you a Community Man?” (Thornton Wilder Papers Box 4). For a self-described genius like Stein, “Community Man” was clearly a term of abuse, suggesting that the needs of the group distracted him from the pursuit of artistic perfection and, perhaps, from avant-garde rigor. From a young age, Wilder tended to associate the communitarian impulse with New England, perhaps his domineering father with Maine roots most particularly (Niven 187–88). At 24, he joked to his parents, “Your queer ‘aesthetic’ over-cerebral son may turn out to be your most fundamental New Englander and most appreciative of the sentiment of group,” and he described himself as a “a sort of male Cordelia!” (Thornton Wilder Papers box 11). The MacDowell Colony gave the Community Man access to several communities simultaneously: the New England village, the artistic inner circle, and, with its support



from a vast network of interested contributors, the wider national community of arts and letters. The MacDowell Colony was the ideal arrangement for this writer of uncertain sexuality, with too many friends and a desire to be socially useful. Pulling together threads of inspiration—the town, the pageant, a potpourri of modernist techniques and tropes—Wilder wrote a play that would give other towns the chance to make art and community coincide.

This is not to say that *Our Town* is entirely sanguine about the relationship between art and community. Cultural tastes in Grover's Corners are unadventurous: "Robinson Crusoe and the Bible; and Handel's 'Largo,' . . . and Whistler's 'Mother'—those are just about as far as we go," confesses the pipe-smoking sage in act 1 (Wilder 161). The town's single representative of capital-C Culture is Simon Stimpson, the bitter, alcoholic choir director whose "troubles" are mentioned but never explained and who commits suicide by act 3. The epitaph on his grave puzzles two townsmen, who see it as "just some notes of music," while the audience learns that the death "was wrote [*sic*] up in the Boston papers at the time" (199). Dr. Gibbs comments that "some people ain't made for small-town life," which the play paints as starkly white, heteronormative, and culturally mediocre (170). For the scholar Kenneth Elliott, Stimpson is an archetypal "Small Town Closet Queen," a covert reference to the homosexuality that could not be presented on stage or screen (124). With Stimpson's suicide, the play acknowledges that not everybody is at home in a town without art, a town that takes for granted, in the Stage Manager's words, that "Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married" (Wilder 174).

Stimpson succumbs to a fate that Wilder never had to confront. The unhappily married choir director, whose compositions Boston celebrates but whose relationships tie him to Grover's Corners, is a dark shadow, a path not taken, of the playwright who doesn't marry and serves the community with well-wrought drama. At least one aspect of Wilder's own life was closer to that of the Stage Manager, impersonally transforming small-town life into art. The MacDowell Colony helped make possible this accommodation between art and civic life. Grover's Corners may be based on Peterborough, but Peterborough has the MacDowell Colony for a point of contact with a cosmopolitan world of arts and letters. A favorite retreat for gay composers like Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, scandalously divorced poets like Elinor Wylie, and lifelong bachelors like Robinson and Wilder, the Colony was a place where Wilder could feel at home yet still connected to a small-town New England milieu that he considered quintessentially American.

## 5. Coda: Civic Media

*Our Town* remains powerful because local cultural actors can find within its confines a way to articulate and enact the relationship between art and community. Even as it highlights the role of the arts (or arts organizations) in “stage managing” the representation of everyday life, communities can discover in it the means for negotiating that representation at different scales of time and space, just as they can for acknowledging difference without implying conflict.

In closing, I turn to another recent use of *Our Town* to tell a story, not about a town, but about an entire medium. Podcasts are a relatively young form. In the second edition of *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound* (2017), John Biewen notes that in the English-language media ecosystem alone, hundreds of thousands of online, on-demand audio shows draw millions of new listeners, the majority of them in their twenties and thirties. Some of the most popular shows, like *This American Life*, were radio programs before they were podcasts. But despite this debt to radio, podcasts inspire distinctly Web 2.0 consumption patterns: binge-listening, viral sharing, rapid hot takes from bloggers. And yet imagining community is central for developing self-understanding of the medium. How do you make a community out of a million individuals on different continents, listening to a recorded show at the end of their earbuds? “Community” is central to the content, rhetoric, and business strategy of many podcasts, and *Our Town* offered a way for one highly self-reflexive show to make a case for its role as a civic mediator.

*99% Invisible* is a podcast about architecture and design. The creator and host is Roman Mars, who is also the founder of the Oakland-based media company Radiotopia. The name signals its progressive bent and funding model; it relies on a combination of grants, corporate sponsors, and listener donations. One of its most popular episodes was #259 (“This is Chance”), which tells the story of the radio anchorwoman who stayed on the air for 59 hours during the great Alaska earthquake of 1964. The episode is less about architecture than about destruction. But it is also about the role media plays in the life of a city.

It begins by describing the devastation: Mars tells us that 115 people died in the earthquake. Houses upside down. No light or power, no communication. But miraculously, “there was radio” (01:12): “a station in Anchorage, running on backup generators,” its signal relayed from Fairbanks to Juneau to Seattle, even as far as Tokyo, where the station president heard the voice of his “newsgirl” Genie Chance, telling them that “the city was still there” (01:12, 02:43, 02:08). The episode is a cross between narrative journalism and a radio play. Actors reproduce audio from the broadcast and

interviews with city residents. We hear Genie's voice connecting lost and worried citizens: "Mary Sweet is asked to contact her mother. Mother is at home" (2:29). The idea of overhearing distressed parents reach out to lost children was understandably affecting. It made me cry. (So does *Our Town*.)

Anchorage was a frontier town built on oil speculation, and in 1964, it was the fastest growing city in the US. The podcast episode gives some of its history. As with all boomtowns, people worried it was only temporary, so residents founded cultural institutions to make the place feel real: a volunteer symphony, a radio station, a little theater. As it happens, on the night of the earthquake, the local theater troop was performing *Our Town*. And, as with the Manchester production, disaster lends a sense of urgency to local cultural institutions. The episode webpage shows an archival photograph of downtown Anchorage after the earthquake: Main Street replaced by a jagged-edged cavern; a banner advertising OUR TOWN hanging askew in the background. The play became a sign of community resilience when it resumed production to a sold-out crowd, just days after the ground stopped shaking. As one citizen observed, "Everyone wanted to be with someone else" (21:44).

"This is Chance" is a cascading media genealogy, and like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, the narrator makes the moral explicit:

that kind of togetherness is basically what Thornton Wilder's play is about: it's a play about daily life in a small town—the deaths and marriages, tragedies and births. And how, under all that transience, there's a stability to every community over time. . . . All night at the theater, the character of the Stage Manager talked to the audience directly, narrating the story of the play, kind of like I've been doing tonight. (21:50–22:31)

In this podcast of a radio play about a radio broadcast and a performance of *Our Town*, the narrator makes an analogy between the radio anchorwoman and himself, and both with Wilder's Stage Manager. All three remind the audience they are "still there," that communities persist in the face of chance, disaster, uncertainty. In 1938, Wilder's play comforted audiences worn out by the Depression and worried about the rise of fascism; in 1964, it signaled resilience to a frontier town trying to survive natural disaster. The episode makes an implicit analogy between those periods and the US present of Muslim bans, neo-Confederate rallies, super-charged hurricanes, and "permanent war."<sup>14</sup> And it seeks to comfort listeners with the old-timeyness of a radio play and the poignancy of Emily's speech at the end of *Our Town*, which Mars reads in full.

It is easy to dismiss the gesture as specious. Yoking together play, radio, and podcast, the show elides the differences among media. The narrator's claim that Genie and the Stage Manager address their audiences "just like I've been doing tonight" is a nostalgic lie. Genie Chance's radio broadcast was inspiring and effective *because* it was live; that's how it allowed worried relatives as far as Texas or Tokyo to call in and ask for news about their earthquake-shaken family in Alaska. Streaming a prerecorded podcast is more like watching prestige television: a highly edited object that gives the feeling of intimacy on demand. Nor do the differences stop there. Podcasts also don't evoke the visual irony of a performance: a brown-skinned, bearded Stage Manager with a Moroccan name; a black teenager from Compton in Emily's wedding dress. This is all true. But the production history of *Our Town*—its roots in Wilder's relationship with the MacDowell Colony—suggest that Mars has a point when he positions podcasts in a genealogy of civic mediation. Podcasts are making a bid to take on the public-shaping function that network television, radio, the novel, and drama did before them.

"This is Chance" did not start out as a studio recording, but as a Radiotopia Live stage event, performed in Los Angeles, Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco in 2016 and 2017. No scenery, but live actors and musicians playing original music. The edited recording that ended up in podcast feeds enabled listeners anywhere to eavesdrop on a local theatrical performance. This technologically enhanced scaling up of community is what *Our Town* is all about. I suspect Wilder would approve.

Mars's podcast episode both exemplifies and allegorizes a wider trend in the industry. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 spawned a new genre of podcast with the explicit purpose of reviving democratic participation and civic engagement. Examples include *Civics 101* from New Hampshire Public Radio (launched just before Trump's inauguration) and *Can He Do That?* from the *Washington Post*—a show that explores the limits of presidential executive power. Mars created a similar show called *What Trump Can Teach US About Con Law*, in which he interviews his former law professor about emoluments and pardons. This same civic impulse has spawned whole companies. Former Obama Administration staffers and speechwriters founded Crooked Media, using podcasts to organize a liberal, millennial opposition to Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. Their shows have names like *Pod Save America* and *Pod Save the People*, whose hosts urge voter registration and canvassing, and channel donations to Democratic candidates in cheaper media markets.

Shows like *Pod Save America* aspire to get young Americans to donate, vote, and run for office. But their impact may be as

emotional as it is directly political. A recent collection of essays by podcast producers celebrates the power of the human voice to “sneak in, bypass the brain, and touch the heart” (Biewen). Podcasts, like car radios, make people feel less alone when modern technology and employment isolate them. Having recently moved to a city where I don’t know anybody and don’t speak the local language, podcasts fill a void: for news from home, for familiar idioms, for the chance to share—perhaps morbidly—in the anxiety of US politics. In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Lauren Berlant describes what she calls the “intimate public sphere” as a realm of public life where representation and recognition help to create a sense of social belonging (ix). In keeping with the middlebrow culture of the past, political podcasts participate in an emotion-rich world that might sometimes have direct political consequences, and might at other times merely entertain.

*Our Town*, writers’ colonies, podcasts—all of these formations participate in the art of civic mediation, endeavoring both to inspire feelings of community and belonging through cultural production and to fund cultural production by turning those civic feelings into grants, donations, and subscriptions. Civic mediation exploits the possibilities of modern mass communication and transit—the history of US writers’ colonies is unimaginable without railroads—to bypass the networks of state and corporate patronage that make culture directly beholden to the ruling class. We can admire the resourcefulness of these cultural workers and acknowledge the appeal of democratic cultural patronage, without ignoring the limitations of this model. Who owns the railroads? Who lays the fiber-optic cable? Who made the algorithm that recommends the podcast? *Our Town* has little to say about these mundane and powerful infrastructures, but much to say about how to mobilize civic feeling into a collective work of art.

### Notes

1. See Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama* (1956), translated by Michael Hays, especially pp. 83–84. Scholars have speculated that Chinese and Japanese theater inspired *Our Town*’s Stage Manager and minimalist scenic presentation. See Sang-Kyong Lee, *East Asia and America: Encounters in Drama and Theatre* (2000), p. 82. Ju Yon Kim raises the possibility that Wilder was influenced by *The Yellow Jacket*, a 1912 Broadway production by Harry Benrimo and George Hazelton, Jr., advertised as “Chinese Drama Played in [the] Chinese Manner.” See “Trying on *The Yellow Jacket*: Performing Chinese Exclusion and Assimilation,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 62, no.1, Mar. 2010, p. 75.

2. Outstanding recent scholarship on US literary institutions abounds. My references here are to Mark McGurl’s coinages in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and*

the *Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), p. 32 and Margaret Doherty, "State-Funded Fiction: Minimalism, National Memory, and the Return to Realism in the Post-Postmodern Age," *American Literary History*, vol. 27, no.1, 2015, pp. 79–101.

3. In his introduction to Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Randal Johnson notes that "the dispositions represented by the habitus," which Bourdieu explores at length in earlier works like *Distinction* (1979), "inevitably incorporate the objective social conditions of their inculcation" (5). This allows Bourdieu to speak of a "working-class habitus" or a "middle-class habitus."

4. Wilder admired Baker, declaring as early as high school his intention to pursue post-graduate work in dramatic composition with the famous Harvard professor. Though Wilder never ended up studying with Baker, his sister Isabella did. See Wilder, p. 822 and Penelope Niven, *Thornton Wilder: A Life* (2012), p. 239.

5. This section's title alludes to Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982). Trachtenberg argues that the museums and universities founded by gilded-age elites were "monuments to the philanthropy of private wealth" that "subliminally associated art with wealth, and the power to donate and administer with social station and training" (144–45). In *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1990), Lawrence Levine shows how late nineteenth-century cultural institutions endeavored, when possible, to make working class crowds conform with elite "modes of behavior and cultural predilections" (177). When social control failed, these institutions protected art from the masses, securing peaceful retreats for the wealthy and initiated.

6. In 1933, Executive Director Elizabeth Ames wrote to a guest that Yaddo

is for those who value an ordered and civilized mode of life, for those who are serious creative workers either in achievement or promise and who, therefore, are grateful for this ordered life for rest or for work and play as their problems dictate. This ordered quiet, this observance of certain amenities, as for example, the observance of the studio day and at all times of one's right to privacy in his studio and at certain places in the Mansion, everyone at Yaddo now observes. . . . (qtd. in Alexander 106)

7. An NEA report on cultural spending in ten countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reached similar conclusions: "Direct per capita government spending on the arts was the lowest in the United States—\$6 per person. By contrast, Finland and Germany had comparatively high per capita public arts spending of \$91 and \$85, respectively." See United States, National Endowment for the Arts, *Research Division Note #74: International Data on Government Spending on the Arts*, Jan. 2000, web.

8. See Bridget Falconer-Salkeld, *The MacDowell Colony: A Musical History of America's Premier Artists' Community* (2005), pp. 22–30 and Robin Rausch, "The MacDowells and their Legacy," *A Place for the Arts: The MacDowell Colony, 1907–2007* (2006), edited by Carter Wiseman, pp. 50–132.

9. Falconer-Salkeld speculates that the log cabin was in part a measure compensating for MacDowell's illness. In footnotes, she claims that his neurological deterioration and social phobia, appearing as early as 1891, are consistent with syphilis

(32n54–56). In “The MacDowells and their Legacy,” Robin Rausch notes that the strongest evidence that Edward died from syphilis comes from his death certificate: “Paresis (Dementia Paralytica)” is consistent with the disease, though she also notes that the connection may have been less direct in 1908 (127n15). In the preantibiotics era, syphilis was common, including among composers. See for example C. Franzen, “Syphilis in Composers and musicians—Mozart, Beethoven, Paganini, Schubert, Schumann, Smetana,” *European Journal of Clinical Microbiology & Infectious Diseases*, vol. 27, no. 12, Dec. 2008, pp. 1151–57.

10. See D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (2006), pp. 46–49; McGurl, *The Program Era* (2009), pp. 94–95.

11. In a preface to three plays, Wilder admits to borrowing *Our Town*’s speculations about the afterlife from Dante’s *Purgatory* and declares *The Skin of Our Teeth* “deeply indebted to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*” (Wilder 686–87).

12. Steward’s account was later published as *Chapters from an Autobiography* in 1981. Penelope Niven’s extensively researched biography, *Thornton Wilder: A Life* (2012), assesses Steward’s account at length and concludes, “Wilder was essentially a deeply private man, the product of a repressive upbringing in an intolerant, unforgiving, legally repressive era”; she chooses not to rule on whether he was “heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual” (440). Kenneth Elliott concisely reviews the evidence for Wilder’s homosexuality (and notes that since 2000, a handful of scholars have included Wilder in anthologies of gay writers) (127–31).

13. I have written about Stein’s model of modernist community in “Writing ‘Other Spaces’: Katherine Anne Porter’s Yaddo,” *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 22, no. 4, Nov. 2015, pp. 735–57.

14. The term “permanent war” refers to the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. See Samir Amin, *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World* (2004); Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (2008); Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40; Derek Gregory, “The Everywhere War,” *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 177, no. 3, 2011, pp. 238–50. Thanks to Stephen Voyce who shared this bibliography.

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